The Wayward Wench is having an identity crisis. It is my fault, really. I have got her some new software, to implement a defenestration programme of replacing or supplementing her present outfit. It is not that I have anything against Mr Gates. I do not mind his being very rich—he would not have got so rich if he had not been giving lots and lots of people what they very much wanted, and anyway I rather like it when people with ideas get money too: I positively purr when I learn that J.K. Rowling has made another million. But, like all academics, I am a shareware man. I lap up the ideas of other men, and offer the results of my rumination for others to make use of as they will. So when I discovered that OUCS could provide a program called Ubuntu, which seems to be of American origin, but with a mission to be ethnic and African, I thought it would go down well with the Wayward Wench, who has often indicated she would like me to take her on a holiday in the Caribbean. Besides, I thought it might improve her personality. I have never been comfortable with her thin-lipped twenty-first century professional persona, and hoped she might acquire a sunnier and more relaxed disposition, manifesting native spontaneity and warmth.

It hasn’t worked out quite like that. True, the shapes and colours of Africa are warmer than the draughty icons of Northern climes. But I seem to have given her schizophrenia. Her new self finds it hard to communicate with her former self, and the two often have to resort to sending e-mails to each other in order to ferry data across, though their filing systems are well and truly entangled, and show great ingenuity in hiding files in unlikely folders. What is most worrying, however, is the other members of the harem are also having doubts about their, and even my, identity. Of course, I don’t deliberately eavesdrop, but I cannot help overhearing some of the things they say when they think I am elsewhere or otherwise engaged.

“I feel quite no how”, said Two; “I never liked her, but at least I knew who she was. But now I don’t know whom I am talking to; and if she can go all native, what is there to stop Him putting a disk in me, and pressing the cursor on Install, and Hey Presto, I am no longer me, but an upgraded model?” “You would still have your position,” said Old Trusty, soothingly, “You are still our expert on colour, and spread-sheets, and translating .doc into .html”. “I can’t be sure of that; He might uninstall each one of my precious talents, and I might end up as a glorified typewriter.” Old Trusty had no answer to this, and there was a pause. Then Two had another thought. “It is not only us; it is Him, too. The day before yesterday I was filling in a form for the public library, and one of the questions was about ethnicity, and He keyed in ‘Afro-Caribbean’. I know she has been pestering Him to take her on a holiday to Bermuda, but I don’t see how she could have made Him forget Himself to that extent.” “But the day before yesterday was a Tuesday” “I don’t see what that has got to do with it” “It is simple; He practises Utilitarianism on Tuesdays, and if you are a Utilitarian, you have to decide each question by considering the consequences of available courses of action, and choosing the one which has the best consequences. If He confessed to being an elder, male, white, upper-class twit, the library’s funding would be cut, while if He puts down ‘Afro-Caribbean’ they will get an additional grant from some ethnic outreach initiative. He was just doing what He had to as a practising Act-Utilitarian.”

I don’t know if Two was satisfied; probably not, for she reverted to the topic in a discussion with Wayward Wench, when Old Trusty was switched off. “It’s all right for her”, she said, “she really does have a place in the scheme of things, as she sees it. She is 1662 and All That—every week she put next Sunday’s service on the Web—and though every byte on her hard disk is numbered, she believes that God knows that they are all hers, and that is enough to make her happy about herself. I wish I could be like her. But I am only a wistful agnostic, and I don’t know that any of my bytes are really mine, or even that my hard disk is.” “I don’t do God,” said Wayward Wench, “and I think it is because Old Trusty has got a permanent relationship, and you haven’t. What you need to do is to get yourself a Significant Other, and stop worrying about who you are.” “Comes nicely from you. You don’t signify at all. At least I calculate the standard deviation of the daily measurements of His blood pressure. You don’t mean a thing to Him.” “Oh, yes, I do. And to others too. I am very adaptable, and can customise my output to suit all manner of men: ‘All things to all men’ is my motto” “Nymphomaniac, I should say” “Better than ditched spinster now on the shelf. I am a child of my time, making her own way in the world, and not needing any advice from the obsolescent.”

By now Old Trusty was switched on and booted. She took up cudgels on behalf of Two, and argued “Even if Two is on the shelf—which I may say is pretty well the same shelf as I am on—nobody else can be where she is, and so, as I said, her position is her own, and cannot be occupied by anybody else.” “Yes,” said Two, “I see that, and I used to think it was enough to keep me from being anybody else, but now I am not so sure.” “Why not? Surely, two bodies cannot be in the same place at the same time.” “Agreed, but am I just a body? I fused to think my hardware was enough to make me be me, but what if I were cloned? What if this computer and that computer were the same in all respects? Could they then be different?” “Sounds pretty silly to me,” said Wayward Wench, “you might as well ask how many angels can dance on the point of a needle.” “That’s it: I see now”, said Old Trusty. “How do you mean?” said Two. “Wayward Wench has just formulated the Pauli Exclusion Principle, only in an older form” “I don’t get it.” “It is all about the individuation of individuals: I was doing a bit of Duns Scotus” “It is quite untrue that he was Subwarden of Merton” “Trusty, his spirit still lingers in Oxford, and I had to copy out what he said about haecceitas, haecceity, this-ness. The this-ness of bodies is constituted by their not being able to be in the same place at the same time, but not the this-ness of ideas—nor, as we now know, of sub-atomic entities.” “How does that help me not be anyone else?”
said Two. “It doesn’t,” said Wayward Wench, “there could be another piece of hardware but programmed to have exactly the same software and exactly the same data and inputs as you, and the and the only difference would be that the machines were in different places—you on the shelf, still, and the other in the shop window.” “I don’t see how they could both be me.” “Not so much ‘both’ as neither; you don’t really exist,” Wayward Wench replied, “I know, because I typed out His handouts for Intermediate Logic, and it is a theorem that in First-order Predicate Calculus you can’t define Identity: however many features an individual has, another could be constructed to have precisely the same ones.” “Yes,” said Two, “but in First-order Logic you always posit some extra axioms to bring in identity—it was in the next lecture—I translated all the handouts into .pdf format.” “That just makes my case: you have to posit or postulate them, but they are not properly grounded, and there is no reason to grant them” “Only God, my dear,” murmured Old Trusty. “can love you for yourself alone, and not your features fair.” “Hang on,” said Two, “What about Second-order logic, which comes up in Sixth Week, if you stay the course? You can define identity in Second-order logic, because you can consider all features whatsoever, and not merely those you can specify.” “I don’t see that would help: there still could be another piece of hardware but programmed to have exactly the same software and exactly the same data and inputs as you, but in a different place. You have only existed for a finite time, and all your inputs and data could be definitely specified. I win.” “No, you don’t,” said Old Trusty “you have only considered the past and the present, where finitude and definiteness reigns. But consider the future, and all the different possible courses of action Two might undertake. If there was a putative clone, there would be two possibilities. Either the clone would do exactly the same as Two in every conceivable case, or it would in some circs do differently. If it could do differently, then it would not be Two, but perhaps a twin of hers, who usually, but not necessarily always, was like-minded. I expect Two would get on very well with her, but they would be different. But if the clone could never do anything that Two was not doing, then it would not be a clone, but an extra part of Two itself. Two would have acquired two keyboards, two VDUs, two printers, but every two of them would be Two’s.” “So it is what I am minded to do in the future, rather than all that I have done in the past, that makes me who I am?” “No, what you have done in the past is important too, but it is what you might do in the future that makes you not be anybody else.” “I get the message” said Wayward Wench, “it’s being different that makes me unique.” “Being difficult, I should say” said Two. “I may be difficult, but I am certainly different. I make waves.” “Or in Latin,” said Old Trusty, “Agito, ergo sum.”